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TAGS: [PINS](#) [KISL](#) [RP](#)

SUBJECT: LAND DISPUTE TRIGGERS MILF-GRP ARMED CLASHES

Classified By: Pol/C Scott Bellard for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶11. (C) Summary: The International Monitoring Team, GRP-MILF Coordinating Committee for the Cessation of Hostilities, and the NGO Bantay Ceasefire played key roles in restoring order following March 5-6 armed skirmishes in North Cotabato between elements of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and the Armed Forces of the Philippines. The key dispute is not ideological or organizational but rather rooted in competing claims over a 2,000 hectare tract of land. Tensions remain high, however, and further outbreaks of violence are likely, but the existence of these mechanisms helps to keep the broader peace process on track. End Summary.

Some bad news...

¶12. (C) According to Executive Director of the GRP Peace Negotiations Panel Ryan Sullivan, armed skirmishes during the week of March 5 between the elements of the MILF and AFP in Midsayap, North Cotabato left as many as 19 MILF and 1 AFP soldiers dead, two AFP soldiers wounded, and over 3,000 persons displaced. He emphasized, however, that the dispute was not ideological or organizational but rather stemmed from an ongoing dispute over 2,000 hectares of land straddling three Muslim-dominated townships ("barangays"). According to Sullivan, at least 20 Christians and Muslims have asserted ownership of this land, including MILF member Minda Lanson and Midsayap Mayor Romeo Arana.

¶13. (C) Sullivan explained further that the tensions dated back at least to January, when some of the Christian claimants, including Midsayap Mayor Arana, used members of Civilian Volunteer Organizations (CVOs) as security guards to harvest crops on the land in dispute. Following an armed encounter between the CVOs and suspected members of the MILF, Mayor Arana requested assistance from the AFP, and the fighting intensified. According to local officials and sources at the NGO "Bantay Ceasefire," during January 25-27 skirmishes -- which involved air and ground attacks by the AFP against members of the MILF 106th, 105th, and 101st Base Commands -- killed one CVO and two AFP soldiers, and wounded two civilians, as well as resulted in the displacement of an estimated 1,235 families (or some 6,000 persons).

...with some encouraging news

¶14. (C) Representatives from the CCH and IMT were able quickly and effectively to mediate an end to each outbreak of armed conflict in Midsayap. However, Sullivan highlighted the need for better GRP interagency coordination, noting that just prior to the latest flare up between the AFP and MILF, the AFP had repositioned troops into the buffer zone -- ostensibly to conduct a tactical operation targeted against

wanted terrorist, Abdul Basit Usman -- without notifying the CCCH. Sullivan claimed that local AFP commanders had ignored some of the IMT's recommendations to stabilize the situation until they received explicit instructions from Manila to accept.

15. (C) Comment: Conflicts over land/natural resources remain an integral part of the political and socio-economic landscape of Mindanao, and tensions will continue to peak and ebb. The continued presence of the IMT, CCCH, and Bantay Ceasefire in the region has gone a long way toward minimizing the escalation of these localized disputes into major conflicts that could derail the GRP-MILF peace process, demonstrating again the viability of -- and need for -- these mechanisms, with support from local residents.

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KENNEY